**Writing Conference Ideas**

The following is taken from <http://www.strategicwritingconferences.com/faqs.aspx>:

**When should I confer with students about their writing?**

You can have writing conferences any time students are writing in your classroom. If you use the writing workshop method, you will confer with students as they spend days and even weeks working on a piece of writing. Usually, writing workshop begins with a short minilesson (a whole group lesson), then students work independently on their writing for twenty-to-thirty minutes. During this independent writing time, circulate around the classroom and confer with students.

If you teach writing by giving assignments or prompts, confer with students during class as they work on those assignments.

You can even confer with students if you are not a writing teacher. As long as students use your class time to work on writing—whether it is reading, math, science, or social studies—you can confer with them.

**What will conferring look like in my classroom?**

When conferring, you might move from table to table (or desk to desk) to sit next to students as they write. If you decide to confer at students' tables, it is helpful to carry a small "conferring chair" as you move around the classroom. Or you might sit at a "writing conference table" and call students to you one at a time.

During a conference, sit side-by-side with the student, with her writing in front of both of you. It is best when the conference feels like a conversation, with both you and the student talking and listening to each other. Ask what the student is doing as a writer, compliment what the student is doing well, then teach a writing strategy or technique. Prompt the student to tell you what she is working on and what she needs help with, and, at the end of the conference, to describe how she will use the writing strategy you just taught.

Each writing conference is five to seven minutes; therefore, you will probably confer with four or five students in a class period, depending on how much time students have to work independently. After each conference, note on the record-keeping forms provided any areas of need and the student's progress. This will help you remember the strategy you taught and your ideas for follow-up conferences.

**What are the goals of a writing conference?**

When you confer with a student, it isn't your job to fix or edit the student's writing. Rather, it's to teach the student one writing strategy or technique he can use in a current piece of writing and continue to use in future writing. As you confer, keep in mind Lucy Calkins' wise advice: "[We] are teaching the writer and not the writing. Our decisions must be guided by 'what might help this *writer*' rather than 'what might help this *writing*'" (1994).

**What are the teaching moves in a writing conference?**

**The First Part of the Writing Conference: Identifying the Student's Needs**

During the first part of the conference, identify an area of need. First, find out the stage of the writing process the student is in—prewriting (or rehearsal), drafting, revising, or editing—and the specific kind of writing work she is doing at this stage. Then, assess how well the student is doing that writing work. For example, the student may be in the prewriting stage, trying to find a topic to write about, but is having trouble finding a really good topic. Or the student may be drafting, trying to write with detail, but her writing is general and does not render a clear picture of the subject. Or the student may be editing by reading her draft to herself, but this strategy isn't helping her locate the end of sentences which need periods.

To identify an area of need, you can take three steps during the first part of the conference.

**Step 1: Ask an open-ended question.** By asking an open-ended question, you invite the student to tell you about what he's doing as a writer. Questions such as "How's it going?"; "What are you doing as a writer today?"; and "How can I help you today?" are good ones to start with.

**Step 2: Ask follow-up questions.** Once your conversation with the student gets started, ask follow-up questions. Although the best questions can't be planned—you will think of them as you listen to the student tell you what he's doing—there are a few general questions that can help move along a conference. Effective follow-up questions include "Where are you in the writing process?"; "What strategies are you using in this stage of the writing process?"; and "What are you doing to write this piece well?"

**Step 3: Look at the student's writing.** Looking at the student's writing helps you identify an area of need. Usually it isn't necessary to read an entire notebook entry or draft. If a student is drafting, for example, and working on a lead, just read the lead. If the student is working on topic sentences in a nonfiction draft, take a close look at those sentences.

By the end of the first part of a writing conference, you've identified the area of need. The next step is to use the [Diagnostic Guides](http://www.strategicwritingconferences.com/resources/swcdiagnosticguides.pdf) in *Strategic Writing Conferences* to find corresponding conferences.

**The Second Part of the Writing Conference: Teaching the Writing Strategy or Craft Technique**

In the second part of the writing conference, you'll teach the student a writing strategy or craft technique to help him grow as a writer. *Strategic Writing Conferences* shows you how—clearly and effectively. Every conference models the instructional language and moves that will help you teach students, following these four steps:

**Step 1: Give feedback.** Preface your teaching by giving the student feedback. Try to point out something the student is doing well-and also name the area of need.

**Step 2: Teach.** Just like a story reaches the climax, a conference builds to the teaching moment. Your success in helping a student grow as a writer in a conference depends on your skill as a teacher in the next few minutes. Start by naming and defining the specific strategy or craft technique that you intend to teach. Explain why it's important for the student to learn. To help the student understand the strategy or technique, you might show an example of how a children's book author, such as Patricia Polacco, uses the strategy or technique. Or show how you use the strategy in your own writing. Most importantly, explain how the student can use the strategy or technique in his own writing.

**Step 3: Try it.** Before you end the conference, help the student try the strategy or technique you just taught. Gently nudge the student to talk out how he could use the strategy in his writing, or have the student try it in writing. The purpose of the "try it" step is to give the student a taste of the strategy-enough so that you know he is ready to try it independently.

**Step 4: Link to the student's work.** End the conference by linking the conference to the student's work; that is, tell the student you expect him to try the strategy in his writing and that you hope he will continue to use it in future writing.

With that, the conference is over. Take a minute or two to jot down some notes about the conference on a record-keeping form. Then you're off to the next conference!

**What should I teach in a writing conference?**

There are many things students need to learn in order to become lifelong writers—and you can teach many of them as you confer with students across the school year. *Strategic Writing Conferences* shows how to teach the broad range of writing strategies students need, including:

* the writing process
* qualities of good writing
* how to be initiators of writing.

The writing process itself is a main focus of the conferences. Students need a repertoire of strategies to help them prewrite (or rehearse a topic before drafting), draft, revise, and edit. You'll find conferences that focus on teaching the writing process in all three books of *Strategic Writing Conferences*. For example, for students who are prewriting, you can teach the strategy of brainstorming topics (*Book 1: Topics*, Conference 1, "Finding a Topic by Making a List"). For students who are drafting, you can teach the strategy of making a plan or outline (*Book 2: Topics*, Conference 5, "Getting Started by Making a Basic Plan"). For students who are revising, you can teach the strategy of rereading a draft to add details (*Book 3: Finished Projects*, Conference 1, "Revising by Adding Text"). For students who are editing, you can teach the strategy of reading aloud a draft in order to add punctuation (Book 3: Finished Projects, Conference 17, "Editing by Reading Aloud").

You can focus many conferences on the qualities of good writing and how students can incorporate these qualities into their writing. You'll find conferences that focus on teaching the qualities of good writing in *Book 2: Drafts and Book 3: Finished Projects*. For example, you can teach students how to write a focused draft that gets their point across (*Book 2: Drafts*, Conference 6, "Getting Started by Focusing a Bed-to-Bed Story"), teach them to write precise details (*Book 2: Drafts*, Conference 21, "Crafting a Scene with Precise Details: Actions, Thoughts, and Dialogue"), and how to punctuate sentences to give voice to their writing (*Book 3: Finished Projects*, Conference 16, "Editing for Voice by Using Punctuation Judiciously").

You can also focus conferences on teaching students how to be initiators of writing; that is, to be writers who write purposefully and by choice. Initiators of writing know how to find appropriate audiences for their writing. You can teach students how to identify an appropriate audience, such as specific classmates, for their writing (*Book 2: Drafts*, Conference 1, "Writing for Specific Classmates as an Audience").

Carl Anderson

The following is taken from <http://emedia.leeward.hawaii.edu/writing/Conferencing.htm>:

**CONFERENCING WITH STUDENTS ABOUT THEIR WRITING**

**Why individual writing conferences may be preferable to written feedback**

* Conferences are more personal (many students prefer them).
* Feedback given in person may have more impact (students don't always read carefully written comments -- some just look for the grade).
* Conferences provide an opportunity to build rapport.
* This form of feedback may be less labor-intensive, more satisfying for instructor.

**When to conference**

* As with written feedback, it's usually more valuable when student still has an opportunity to revise (before the paper has been graded).
* If several writing assignments are similar, you could conference about the first paper to explain the grade and provide pointers that will help with subsequent assignments

**Some tips for effective conferencing**

* Sit side-by-side or at adjacent corners so you can **look at the paper together** (this also reduces the power differential and discomfort that some students feel when you're sitting behind a desk).
* Consider beginning by **asking the writer if she has any specific questions** or if there is something in the paper that she needs help with. This can provide a focus for the conference.
* **If you've had time to look over the writing before the conference:** you may have made a few notes to help you remember key points to discuss. Be sure to also give the student an opportunity to contribute to the "agenda" of the session (see preceding tip).
* **If you're looking at the paper for the first time** and time permits, you might wish to read the paper aloud or ask the student to read it to you. This way, you're both involved and either can pause to question or comment as you go along. Sometimes a student will hear something that " doesn't sound right" and you can talk about it. Encourage students to read their papers aloud on their own, too. If you don't have enough time to read aloud, you'll probably be skimming the paper, looking for key features: correct format for a science or business report, thesis statement for a research paper, topic sentences in paragraphs of an essay, etc.
* You may wish to make some notes on the paper during the conference, **but make sure that the student is holding a pen or pencil**, too, so that she retains responsibility and control over her own writing.
* **Focus on a few key areas for feedback;** don't feel you must discuss every "problem" with the paper (too time-consuming, and often too overwhelming for the student). This applies to problems with both content/organization and grammar/mechanics.
* **Grammar problems:** When faced with a paper that has numerous grammar or mechanics problems, try to find a pattern of significant error; for example, if you find many incomplete sentences (sentence fragments), you could point these out to the student. If there are numerous spelling errors, remind the student to use spellcheck.
* Whenever possible, **use "I" language in your comments**; e.g., "I wasn't sure what you meant by this sentence" instead of "This is confusing" or "You didn't express this clearly". This lets the writer know that there is a problem without putting her on the defensive or unnecessarily criticizing her. It also serves to emphasize the purpose of writing: communicating effectively with a specific audience (in this case, you).
* **If something isn't clear or more information is needed, ask the writer to restate or explain;** often these responses will be better than what she wrote. Suggest that the student include these changes and encourage her to make notes on the spot so she doesn't forget..
* **Consider referring the student to English tutors in the LRC for additional help.** English tutors help students with writing assignments for any course, at any point in the writing process (drafting, revising, editing). Tutors don't tell students what to write; they assist student writers in finding and expressing their own ideas. Tutors are not proofreaders who "fix" papers and make them error free, but they do help students to find and correct their own errors. The goal is not only to improve the paper at hand, but also to help students improve their overall writing skill

Beth Kupper-Herr 11/00